

Newsmaker: Legal-aid chief loves challenges

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Taking charge of Nebraska's statewide legal-aid law firm fit Doug German's beliefs in treating everyone fairly and holding those in power accountable.



Doug German

It also fit with his history of taking on new challenges.

Over his nearly 60 years, the Eustis, Neb., attorney has served in the Peace Corps in Colombia and worked as an advance man during Robert F. Kennedy's run for president.

German bought into a coffee farm in Costa Rica and later adopted three sisters from that country. And during a short career as a Cornhusker football player, he shoed a young Tom Osborne off a practice field.

But after about a quarter century in private practice, he resigned in April 2000 and became executive director of Nebraska Legal Services.

The firm had just been created through the merger of three groups: the Legal Aid Society of Omaha, Legal Services of Southeast Nebraska in Lincoln and Western Legal Services of Grand Island.

Since then, he's logged 60,000 miles between Eustis and the firm's seven offices across the state and thrown himself into the firm's effort to see that as many low-income Nebraskans as possible get legal help.

Right now, Nebraska Legal Services, which handles about 95 percent of the state's legal-aid cases, figures it reaches only 15 percent of the 211,000 Nebraskans eligible by income for its services. That's about 8,500 cases a year.

Most of the cases involve family law - from child abuse and neglect matters to landlord-tenant disputes. The group does not handle criminal cases.

Based on an American Bar Association formula, the firm estimates that Nebraska's low-income residents will be involved in about 65,000 significant legal matters this year.

Those who can't afford access to the criminal justice system may lose hope or take matters into their own hands, German said.

"I have a fear that we have a generation of people who are coming up not believing in the system," German said. "That's going to spell problems."

Originally, most legal-aid work was funded by Congress through the Legal Services Corp. With cuts in federal funding, local firms have been pressed to raise more money.

Federal funding will make up \$1.53 million of the Nebraska group's \$3.9 million budget this year. The rest will come from the Nebraska Commission on Public Advocacy, Nebraska lawyers' trust accounts, individual donations, grants and contracts.

Eric Kleiman, a spokesman for Legal Services Corp. in Washington, D.C., said German has been out front nationally in raising funds and in using new technology, including a statewide Web site.

"The best program directors in America are the ones that are able to adjust to the reality of the time," Kleiman said.

German came to Nebraska Legal Services with a goal of doubling the firm's capacity to serve. That means raising an additional \$2.5 million a year.

One step toward that goal was a recent pledge by some of the state's leading lawyers to raise up to \$1 million for the firm over the next three years. Other campaigns are under way.

In addition, Nebraska Legal Services is involved in a committee developing a statewide plan for expanding legal services for low-income residents.

The legal profession, German said, has an obligation to provide access to the justice system because it has taken on the role of gateway to that system.

In a sense, German's new job isn't far from where he started decades ago.

After finishing high school in Cozad, Neb., German went off to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a sophomore, the 6-foot-1, 160-pound quarterback joined the freshman football team. It was 1961, Bob Devaney's first year as coach.

One day, German was out throwing passes at an early practice. People often dropped by asking to run a few plays. One was a skinny redhead.

German agreed but told the redhead he'd better get out of there when the linemen came out. Two weeks later, Tom Osborne, then a graduate assistant, was one of his coaches. German's football career was short - he admits he was outclassed - but he still has a copy of Devaney's first playbook.

German graduated with a mechanical engineering degree in 1965, then joined the Peace Corps, spending two years in Colombia.

Back in Nebraska, he helped organize part of a whistlestop tour from Cheyenne, Wyo., across Nebraska for the Robert Kennedy campaign. A few weeks later, Kennedy was assassinated in California.

German moved on to simultaneously earn a law degree from UNL and a master's degree in regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania. He worked for a legal-aid firm in Lincoln and briefly ran a legal clinic with two friends. Then he went into private practice in Cozad.

In 1979, he stopped at a Lexington clothing store to buy cowboy boots. A friend persuaded him to see a coffee farm in Costa Rica, mostly as a fun trip.

German and two partners still own the 60-acre farm. He and his wife, Connie Koch, own the Jose Bravo Coffee Co., which buys and markets part of the 40,000 pounds of environmentally friendly coffee the farm produces each year.

Koch owns the Eustis Pool Hall, a local landmark and restaurant, and the Hotel Eustis.

German and Koch adopted three sisters from Costa Rica not long after their marriage in 1985. Years before in Colombia, German had looked into the eyes of poor children and told himself he'd help if he was ever in a position to do so.

The two oldest sisters are married and have their own children. The youngest attends classes and is a standout point guard at Eustis-Farnam High School. German knows, because he goes to her games.

German, who also plays basketball, wants to make sure his new firm's employees have an opportunity for family time while doing good work.

The staff is driven by reasons other than money, he said, and the firm employs some of the area's best attorneys in their fields.

"We will be known, if we're not already, as an outstanding law firm."